



Wealth and Democracy - A review of L. Patriquin's Economic Equality and Direct Democracy in Ancient Athens

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Patriquin (L.) *Economic Equality and Direct Democracy in Ancient Athens*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-137-50347-3

This concise, 83 pages long, book makes one important claim about the ancient Athenian direct democracy of 508–322, and based on that claim a suggestion about modern representative democracies. The claim is that the political equality that characterised the ancient Athenian democracy would not have existed without simultaneously a relative economic equality between the rich, the middling and the poor. The suggestion is that since wealth inequality in contemporary representative democracy has emasculated political equality, the institutions of modern governance must change in order to create a “radical form of people power analogous that held by the Athenian demos”. These are separate issues and should be treated separately.

For this reviewer the value of the book is in the former argument which also comprises the bulk of the book, six out of seven chapters.

After a short introduction on the meaning of *demokratia*, Chapter 2 focuses on the establishment of the Athenian direct democracy from the laws of Solon (594 BC) which restructured land ownership to the institutional reforms of Cleisthenes (508/507). Solon cancelled the debts of poorer Athenians and abolished slavery for default transforming the poor into small free landowners, and made access to political office conditional on wealth holdings instead of birth rights. Patriquin submits that the reform effectively redistributed land from the state to the poor, without the rich landowners losing their properties, for otherwise they would not have conceded to it peacefully. As a consequence, extreme wealth inequality was eliminated and this, according to Patriquin, made possible the emergence of democracy under Cleisthenes, where the rich could not monopolise political power.

Chapter 3 looks at how the institutions of democracy, definition of citizenry, assembly, council, courts and magistracies worked and how they evolved over time.

Chapter 4 looks closely at economic issues and discusses patterns of land distribution, taxation, public expenditure, and the position of slaves and women. Patriquin argues that significant redistribution took place through the fiscal system and that such redistribution was historically unique only to be seen again in modern times with the establishment of the welfare state in the late eighteenth century. Regarding tax progressivity, it is worth adding that Cleisthenes abolished earlier taxation of produce, since the Athenians perceived personal taxation as a sign of servitude (E.M. Harris ‘Workshop, marketplace and household: the nature of specialization in classical Athens and its influence on economy and society’, in P. Cartledge, E.E. Cohen and L Foxhall, (eds), *Money, labour and land. Approaches to the economies of ancient Greece*, (2002) pp. 67–99). Contrary to ancient historians, Patriquin contends that no paradox of equal political rights and unequal land holdings existed and that “One important yet rarely acknowledged aspect of Athenian democracy ... was that it rested on foundation of general economic equality between households” (p.54).

Chapter 5 discusses the anti-democratic thoughts of the acclaimed philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Chapter 6 focuses on the demise of the democracy after the defeat inflicted by Macedon in 322, the oligarchic changes to the constitution, the interminable rebellions and wars against foreign occupiers and the failed attempts of Athens to regain political independence until she was absorbed by Rome (31 BC).

The book is an extremely valuable addition to the social science literature on democracy and will be appreciated by scholars in political economy, political science,

sociology as well as ancient history. The argument regarding the nexus between the distribution of political and economic power is well presented and convincing. It largely agrees with the D. Acemoglu and A.J. *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (2006) influential view that extreme inequality is not conducive to democracy because the rich elite is better off by repressing the poor to prevent redistribution despite the costs of such repression, while the elite extends the franchise to the poor when it expects to lose less from a redistributive democracy rather than an outright revolution.

It is however a pity that Patriquin has not consulted the considerable work published by political economists that uses economic analysis, and especially collective choice and game theory, to analyze the emergence and institutional performance of the ancient Athenian democracy. Similarly to Patriquin, this literature explores the extension of the franchise to the poorer classes of citizens, the adoption of collective decision making rules, choice of tax and expenditure instruments and institutional evolution, notions of rationality, property rights, conflict, unintended consequences, credibility of commitments and market economy; see for example R.K. Fleck and F.A. Hanssen. 'The origins of democracy: A model with applications to Ancient Greece' *JLE* 46 (2006), 115–146; G. Tridimas. 'A political economy perspective of direct democracy in ancient Athens' *CPE* 22 (2011), 58–72; C.H. Lyttkens, *Economic Analysis of Institutional Change in Ancient Greece. Politics, Taxation and Rational Behaviour* (2013).

Readers of the book may also wonder why Patriquin does not make a single direct reference to the ancient authors whose writings are repeatedly referred to, but simply refers to the modern author that cites ancient sources. In contrast, he often explains his argument by quoting verbatim modern historians.

It is welcoming and indeed appreciated that a sizeable part of the book is devoted to the fall of Athens. However, the book tells us virtually nothing about the Athenian naval supremacy achieved in the early to mid fifth century, following the happy accident of silver discovery in Attica, the political empowerment of the poor *thetes* who had been previously excluded from public office, but gained profitable employment as rowers and proved indispensable in manning the navy; the successes against the Persians; leadership of the Athenian League; and the military setbacks after the restoration of the democracy in 403. This omission results in a somehow unbalanced historical narrative of an otherwise well argued case.

On the contrary, the suggestion of the book leaves a lot to be desired. A litany of afflictions harming modern democracy is first offered (p.80) to be followed by the contention that despite universal suffrage ‘the vote is enfeebled by massive economic inequality ... [a] condition [that] make[s] it impossible to achieve social justice, something that should be at the heart of a democratic polity by definition’ (p.81). There two flaws here. The first is to appeal to broad notions of social justice without a clear definition of what the latter encapsulates. Obviously, opinions diverge greatly on this. The second is a misconception about democracy. Specifically, it is erroneous to confer ethical qualities to democracy. Democracy is best understood as a method of aggregating preferences and resolving disputes about collective issues (rather than private matters) which concern all members of the community. Social choice theory has long identified several defects of democratic mechanisms, including the rational ignorance of voters (A. Downs, *An economic theory of democracy*, 1957), the possibility that a social choice equilibrium may not exist (K.J. Arrow, *Social choice and individual values*, 1951) and the agency relationship, where the policy outcome is decided by political representatives – agents who may reflect the preferences of the voters only

indirectly and can be unduly influenced by special interest groups (B. Manin, *The principles of representative government*, 1997). Interpreting democracy as rule by the majority preference of those citizens that took the trouble to register their preferences in a competitive vote means that its outcome has no moral force.

How to solve conflicts about distribution of assets and political power is a question that will never go away. It is no surprise that it occupied the ancient Greeks both as an intellectual endeavour and a set of practical arrangements. Despite some reservations, Patriquiné has offered a book whose arguments will fascinate and intrigue the scholar and the uninitiated alike.

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